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SUBJECT: MALDIVES: GOVERNMENT, OPPOSITION ACCUSE EACH
OTHER OF FOMENTING VIOLENCE

REF: COLOMBO 1420

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires James F. Entwistle. Reason: 1.4 (b,d
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SUMMARY

1. (C) Although the streets of Male' were calm August 15 for the first night since August 12, at least 137 people remain in detention as a result of the preceding nights' unrest. ICRC is planning a visit to Maldives to meet the detainees. In an August 15 meeting in Colombo, opposition Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) representatives charged that the Government's heavy-handed over-reaction to an initially peaceful demonstration August 12 had "inflamed" the local population, provoking street violence that carried over into subsequent nights. The MDP fears the Government will use the events of August 12-14 as a pretext to keep key MDP figures in prolonged detention--just as happened the previous year. Foreign Minister Ahmed Shaheed, on the other hand, told the Charge' on August 16 that the MDP was intent on fomenting violence, adding that he expects more unrest in the month to come. The tendency on the part of both the Government and the MDP to hyperbolize the confrontation points to the continued lack of political sophistication on both sides. While the decision to allow political parties to register was an encouraging step forward, the Government's all-too-obvious discomfort in allowing them to function as parties--especially if, like the MDP, they are in the opposition--suggests that Maldives' democratic growing pains will continue for some time to come. Despite the bumps in the road, we believe the trend toward reform is generally in the right direction and worthy of continued U.S. support. End summary.

MDP: GOVERNMENT PLOT TO DISCREDIT OPPOSITION

2. (SBU) In an August 15 meeting with poloff in Colombo, seven members of the opposition Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP), including MDP Spokesman Mohamed Latheef, People's Majlis MPs Moosa Manik and Mohamed Aslam, and Special Majlis MP and former Attorney General Mohamed Munavvar, charged that the Government of Republic of Maldives' (GORM) harsh over-reaction to an initially peaceful protest August 12 had "inflamed" ordinary Maldivians, fueling violent demonstrations later that night and on the two succeeding nights. According to these interlocutors, when police began to haul away MDP Chairman Mohamed Nasheed and three other MDP activists from a sit-down protest in the Maldivian capital of Male' August 12 (Reftel), the spectacle quickly drew a crowd of interested onlookers. When security forces began to try to disperse the crowd with tear gas, rubber bullets and water cannon, a larger confrontation erupted, with some in the crowd throwing bricks and rocks. (Note: In some cases, more than bricks and stones were thrown. Reliable sources in two multilateral organizations confirm having seen tennis balls set on fire, and in one instance, an apparent Molotov cocktail being lobbed about.)

3. (SBU) MDP MPs' requests to meet with the Speaker of the Majlis and the Minister of Defense to defuse tensions were refused, they reported, and the situation rapidly escalated. The violent demonstrations of the succeeding two nights were largely provoked by the security forces' heavy-handed attempts at crowd control, the MDP representatives asserted. GORM allegations that the MDP had orchestrated the violence are false, they said, contending instead that the demonstrations were spontaneous reflections of the popular desire for reform and dissatisfaction with the status quo. In addition, some hinted darkly, the GORM was hiring drug addicts and goons to foment violence and then blame it on the MDP.

4. (C) Even though there had been no demonstrations the night of August 15, the MDP delegation said, the GORM was continuing to arrest party members and sympathizers--including those who had not been present on the streets during the protests. (In a separate telephone

conversation from Male', MDP MP Ibrahim Ismail told poloff that a gang of thugs had stormed the home of another MDP MP on Male' and beaten him.) MDP MP Mohamed Munavvar, who spent more than three months in detention after the previous year's unrest, and Spokesman Mohamed Latheef speculated that the GORM might be collecting "evidence" to justify keeping key MDP figures in extended detention in an effort to discredit the party. With parties now able to register legally, the MDP had been pressing Gayoom to let the parties test the popular will by holding early elections, Latheef continued, which Gayoom is unwilling to do. Noting that some pro-GORM MPs had recently tabled a motion in the People's Majlis to reopen sedition investigations against MDP figures detained in last year's unrest, Latheef said that President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom feared the MDP's growing popularity and knew his own newly formed party would not prevail in free and fair elections against the MDP. The international community should put pressure on Gayoom to commit to "a time-bound schedule" to implement the reforms he has pledged to undertake (separation of powers, independence of the judiciary, etc.), as well as early elections. If Gayoom refuses, "we will take to the streets," Latheef pledged. The discussion then quickly degenerated into a heated argument between Latheef and Munavvar about whether or not MDP partisans would/should indeed take to the streets; poloff left the meeting before the resolution of this internal (and, for the MDP, all-too-typical) debate.

GORM: MDP PLOT TO OVERTHROW THE GOVERNMENT

15. (C) In an August 16 meeting with Charge' in Colombo, newly appointed Foreign Minister Dr. Ahmed Shaheed said that the GORM response had been necessary to maintain law and order. Public protests are not allowed under Maldivian law, but police had not acted to remove Nasheed and others on August 12 until they began shouting, "Kill Gayoom," Shaheed asserted. (Note: This is the first time we have heard any suggestion, including from Government sources, that Nasheed was advocating violence. In fact, Government Spokesman Mohamed Shareef had told us that Nasheed's protest, while illegal, was nonetheless peaceful, and initial Government explanations of his detention said that he had been placed in protective custody.) The GORM had received previous indications that the MDP was planning some kind of demonstration to mark the one-year anniversary of the August 12-14 unrest in 2004; frankly, Shaheed observed, knowing MDP frustration at the slow pace of promised reforms, he had been expecting something worse. He added that he expects more unrest in the month to come. The Foreign Minister rejected MDP claims that the police and National Security Service (NSS) had over-reacted; they had to resort to tear gas and rubber bullets to quell the street violence the MDP (which he, in turn, accused of employing drug addicts and thugs) was fomenting. He added that 137 people remain in detention, but emphasized that the seven-day limit during which they may be held without charge will be followed strictly, and claimed that many were being released already.

16. (C) Shaheed said that there had apparently been some internal debate within the MDP in the days leading up to August 12 about whether to mark the one-year anniversary with some kind of protest, with Nasheed and others arguing for a public display and some MPs pleading for a less confrontational route. (Note: Given what we have seen of MDP in Colombo, we are not surprised to hear of this apparent lack of MDP consensus.) The GORM was trying to reach out to some of these "cooler heads" within the opposition party, Shaheed indicated. He said he believed the MDP felt compelled to resort to violent protests because it feared Gayoom would succeed in "rebranding" himself as a democrat, now that Constitutional reforms are impending. (Comment: The reforms are not impending that fast. The People's Majlis, which was specifically constituted in June 2004 to consider constitutional reforms, remains mired a year later in seemingly endless discussions of rules of procedure and has yet to debate a single proposed change. Shaheed, perhaps optimistically, nonetheless said he expects a new Constitution will be ready one year from now. End comment.) Having cut many of his long-time cronies from his Cabinet in the July 14 reshuffle, Gayoom is more vulnerable than ever, Shaheed said, facing pressure from disgruntled former Ministers on the one hand and MDP malcontents on the other. When asked about the move to reopen old sedition cases against MDP stalwarts, Shaheed said the motion was tabled by a Majlis "back-bencher" and did not have GORM support.

17. (C) Charge' told Shaheed that the U.S. had been encouraged by some recent reforms, including the registration of parties, adding that the GORM seems generally headed down the right path toward greater democracy and respect for human rights, an effort the U.S. supports. Nonetheless, while acknowledging the importance of maintaining law and order, Charge' emphasized that the GORM must ensure that the police response is appropriate and fully respectful of human rights

and that any detentions be legitimate and defensible. Shaheed said these were issues that he and the Attorney General in particular took very seriously.

VIEW FROM THE MULTILATERALS

18. (C) On August 17 poloff met in Colombo with ICRC Deputy Head of Regional Delegation Maarten Merkelbach, who is traveling to Maldives to meet with detainees. (Note: This is only ICRC's second visit to Maldives. The first occurred in April when, according to Merkelbach, there were no "clients" in detention. End note.) Merkelbach said he had asked the Home Ministry for permission to visit when he first heard of the detentions on August 13; the Home Ministry responded affirmatively "within a matter of hours." He characterized his GORM interlocutors during his April visit as "very positive, very cooperative" and refreshingly "frank" in admitting missteps in the past. The police, which were only separated from the NSS a year ago, were not given appropriate civil affairs/human rights training to help them make the change to their new role as a civilian force, Merkelbach noted. Many of those he met with, including personnel in the Attorney General's Office and the police, freely acknowledged deficiencies in current operations and pleaded for ICRC assistance in bringing such practices in line with international standards. With more than 100 people now in detention as a result of the August 12-14 unrest, he observed, "it will be interesting to see how the system functions under pressure."

19. (C) On August 17 poloff spoke by telephone with Minh Pham, the former UNDP Resident Representative in Maldives. Although he is no longer in Maldives, Pham said he remains in regular communication with contacts there. From what he has heard of how events transpired August 12-14--and from what he knows from long-term contact with many of the key players--he said he believes that GORM and opposition forces are at an impasse. The lack of political maturity on both sides makes compromise difficult, he observed. Absent such compromise, however, Maldives is "heading for a clash," he predicted. To avert that prospect, he suggested the international community take a public stand that a) appeals for calm and reason on both sides; and b) calls for the GORM to adopt "a clear timetable," with identifiable benchmarks, on reform. "People have heard enough (about reform); now they want to see something" concrete in the form of separation of powers, independence of the judiciary and other measures Gayoom has been saying he will undertake for the past year. Noting the strong mutual mistrust in which Gayoom and the MDP hold one another, he suggested that international mediation could be the best way forward.

110. (C) In a separate telephone conversation from Male' on August 17, Acting UNDP ResRep Kari Blenheim told poloff that average Maldivians seemed "shocked and disturbed" by the unaccustomed violence of this past week, adding that the general consensus seemed to be that the police and NSS "were heavy-handed in some instances." Although the streets were calm the nights of August 15 and 16, "underlying tensions" persist. She reiterated other reports of internal dissension/indecisiveness within the MDP; some are militating for instantaneous reform while others, noting that parties were only legalized in June, are arguing for greater patience. The country is going through a period of rapid change, Blenheim commented, much of it positive. Besides the legalization of political parties, she cited the July 14 Cabinet reshuffle, which introduced younger, more innovative technocrats into that heretofore ossified group, as especially promising. For example, she said the new Atolls Development Minister is "vocal" about the need for better governance, has suggested that island chiefs should be elected instead of appointed, and wants to promote civic education in the local population. Echoing some of the views of her colleague Minh Pham, Blenheim suggested that to help ensure that change is peaceful and to assuage opposition suspicions, the GORM should adopt a better defined process leading up to elections so that people know there is "some kind of plan" for broader democracy to take root.

COMMENT

111. (C) The pace of political reform in Maldives may not seem especially speedy to an outsider, but for a country that has had the same President (with almost the same Cabinet) for over 25 years and no political parties ever, it is significant and worthy of continued U.S. support. There are bound to be growing pains along the way, but these cramps and kinks are especially difficult to work out in an atmosphere of such intense and personalized mutual suspicion. The accusations and counter-accusations we have heard--invariably depicted in almost apocalyptic terms--from both sides over the past few days demonstrate how politically unsophisticated

both sides remain--and how far Maldives must still travel on the road to a strong multiparty democracy. A more clearly delineated timeframe for key reforms, such as an independent judiciary, might be an important step Gayoom could take toward building the confidence needed for the MDP and GORM to make that trip together. While the GORM's ready invitation to the ICRC is heartening, we will be watching closely to see whether detainees are kept without charge for beyond the seven-day limit.

ENTWISTLE